

## **The Accumulation of Dispossession? Land Grabbing and Land Reforms in Southern and Eastern Africa.**

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The recent scramble for African land alarmed many analysts and commentators (GRAIN, 2008; Daniel and Mittal, 2010). And indeed the question of a new global land grabbing, which involved transnational corporations, national states and private investors, has been at the core of a recent global interest in academic circles, within global development institutions and for transnational peasant movements. The term land grabbing generally refers to large scale, cross borders commercial land deals carried out by transnational corporations or initiated by food-insecure foreign governments (Zoomers, 2010: 429). Demographic increases and accelerated urbanization with the consumerist push from newly industrialized countries seem to have been the main factors driving the global demand for food in the midst of financial and food crises. It is also the case that fluctuating global oil prices seem to be at the root of the development of bio-fuels policies aimed at setting up more stable, long-term energy security and at mitigating national energy bills (Cotula, et al., 2009: 54-57).

The conjunctural coincidence of rising food prices and low land prices has pushed many food insecure governments to invest heavily in land, and countries that rely on food imports to feed their people are accessing vast areas of farmland abroad for their own offshore food production (GRAIN, 2008:3-6).

This has engendered a rediscovery and re-evaluation of the importance of land. Suddenly land is newly at the core of development discourse and of foreign and national direct investments. The World Bank Development Report estimated that 45 million hectares of land have involved in commercial deals in Africa in 2009 (Voegel, 2010:vi).

The World Bank, the FAO, IFAD and UNCTAD defined the global land grab a “development opportunity” and designed a code of conduct for land deals to fulfil such expectation. The guidelines issued by these institutions emphasize the importance of principles of responsible agricultural investments (RAI) as transparency, respecting land rights, being consultative and promoting social and environmental sustainability (FAO, IFAD, UNCTAD, WB, 2010).

The assault on African land has been vigorously contested by transnational social movements. These include La Via Campesina that opposes the preoccupation of legalistic architecture and the discourse of corporate social responsibility (La Via Campesina, 2011). The radical narrative claims that foreign governments are in the forefront of land grabbing and that transnational agri-business

and financial banking corporations, which are key and dominant players, are driving this process. The argument has been that land grabbing converts areas originally and currently devoted to food production for subsistence and domestic consumption to land devoted to forests being converted to either food production for exports or production of biofuels mainly for export or national consumption (Borras and Franco, 2010).

Well-informed and analytically grounded research from critical agrarian studies brought to the fore differentiated sets of questions. These included the political dynamics of changes in and struggles over land use and property relations (Borras and Franco, 2010), the transformation of the world food system and its approximation to a food for-fuel regime (McMicheal, 2010), the crystallization of an agro-imperial pattern of neo-colonial exploitation and domination (Petras, 2008) in the context of a triple financial, food and energy crisis.

From a Southern African perspective Ruth Hall has elaborated a preliminary “typology of commercial land deals” investigating the nature, the size and the terms of land acquisition in Southern Africa (Hall, 2010). Her main argument is that the rush for bio-fuels, mining extraction, forestry and agricultural deals characterized the specific form land grabbing assumed in Southern Africa. Richardson similarly argued that South African agribusiness and its processing industries with its mixed construction, manufacturing and finance components, are steadily expanding an oligopolistic sugar industry in Southern Africa nowadays more strictly connected to biofuels through the production of ethanol (Richardson, 2010). The centralization of control over land, labour and commodity value chains and the concentration of capital are increasingly pushing the agrarian structure of surrounding countries to resemble that of a settler state like South Africa. This led Ruth Hall to label it the “South Africanisation” of the region (2010). South Africa’s new energy policy in fact recently increased its target for renewable content in the national fuel supply from 2 to 10% (RSA, 2010:60). The Tanzanian government aims to rise to 10% the contribution of biofuels to national energy security policy by 2020 (Sulle and Nelson, 2009). Sulle and Nelson estimate that Tanzania has 44 million ha of arable land, yet only 10.2 million ha is currently under cultivation (2009:15). Some companies are thus proposing biofuel projects involving initial investments of up to US\$ 1 billion, or several billion US dollars over the next 10-20 years (Sulle and Nelson, 2009:3). Although the land requested has yet to be acquired the rush for biofuels is changing the rural geography of Tanzania. Crops like jatropha, oil palm and sugar are rapidly increasing.

South African corporate capital in its various forms – financial, mining, agricultural, merchant – is moving *en masse* throughout Southern and Eastern Africa in the course of post-apartheid transition. In countries like Mozambique (Chossudovsky, 1997), Tanzania (Shivji, 2005), Uganda (Mabikke, 2011:5) and Congo (Martiniello, 2010; Hall, 2010), Afrikaner agribusiness is expanding its control

of land through massive investments in large-scale commercial farming, food processing, the production of biofuels and eco-tourism.

Against this background it is interesting to note that Southern and Eastern Africa are also at the core of intense debates over policies of land reforms and democratization. Post-colonial authoritarianism, especially evident in Zimbabwe, Mozambique and to a certain extent in South Africa, and the increase of poverty and inequality are questioning the pertinence of post-liberation development policies (Andreasson, 2009). Land reforms have forged processes of reconciliation in many Southern African social formations. In fact around discourses of land restitution, redistribution and equity new socio-political compromises have been created and people expectations nurtured. However neo-liberal, market-based, land reforms have been unable to redress the legacy of racist political regimes especially with regard to control and access to land in South Africa (Hall, 2004; Cliffe, 2010) and in Mozambique (Negrao, 2002) maintaining the status quo rather than altering the relations of power in the countryside (Lahiff, 2007).

In the case of Tanzania the policy of land reform after a long process of popular participation and consultation ended up in adjusting to guidelines of global development institutions pushing for titling, individualization of land property and expansion of land markets in order to attract large scale investments (Shivji, 1998; Manji, 2006). The Ugandan case where a land policy has been discussed in the last years, pressures are mounting for the formalization cum commercialization of communal tenure. The only counter-current experience is given by Zimbabwean land reform which notwithstanding the highly authoritarian character of the state has been able to redistribute between 40% and 70% of the previously white owned land to small and medium scale farmers (Scoones, 2010; Moyo, 2009)

Politico-democratic dispensations have been. Post-independent governments have been constrained by their respective political, economic and institutional legacies while promises of transformation of established political and economic orders have been tempered by underlying socio-economic power structures (Adam, et al). The prolonged and entrenched developmental impasse experienced during democratic transitions in Southern and Eastern Africa constitutes, here, the politico-cultural environment within which new alternatives to mainstream development policies can be (re)-thought and envisioned in the light of the failure to overcome debilitating socio-economic legacies emerged as a result of centuries of colonialism.

This research proposal aims at decoding, on one hand, the object of land grabbing starting from an understanding of processes of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2003; Harvey, 2005) or by

displacement (Araghi, 2000) in the context of an evolving agro-food-feed-fuel complex (Borras and Franco, 2011). On the other, it aims at dissecting the impact of processes of land alienation on land tenure and agricultural local systems and land reforms policies in three countries: South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda. This is important to explore alternatives and more socially and environmentally sustainable avenues to development especially in the light of the salience and centrality of land for the majority of people in Southern and Eastern Africa. Land is in fact simultaneously a necessary resource to small-scale holders and local agriculturalists for livelihoods strategies, and a territory, which embodies social, cultural and environmental dimensions fundamental for social reproduction and identity practices.

The time is ripe to rethink a new political economy of development through the prism of land and agrarian reforms and rural development. Ergo the proposed research work represents an endeavour to symbiotically and dialogically interlink analyses of state, markets and societal actors relations with a systematic and coherent critique of actual development paradoxes and dilemmas, to envision a possible and necessary switch beyond status quo intellectual environment which prevents the conceptualization of alternative societal configurations in an increasing unjust and uneven regional politico-economic system. This research project will analyse the complex processes associated with land and the dynamics of agrarian change. This will not be done in terms of costs and benefits, risks and opportunities, as paraded by the mainstream literature anchored in agricultural development economics. Instead the research approach of this proposal will be implemented through an agrarian political economy perspective. This will address issues of social relations of property, production, exchange and social reproduction by posing the four questions: who owns what? Who does what with the land and other associated resources? who gets the benefits of the processes linked to land acquisition? Finally what is done with the benefits of the extracted surplus that may accrue from land purchases (Bernstein, 2010:22-23).

Asking these questions will help develop an understanding of how land deals impact differentially on communities because of class differentiation and uneven terms of that incorporation. It will also help to explore the newly formed state-capital relations across this geographical spectrum. Only when unpacked and located in particular settings are the real trade-offs exposed. These cut across political, social, economic and ecological domains (Borras, Mcmicheal, Scoones, 2010:583). Such approach helps to clarify that land deals must be understood through social, economic and political relations that underpin the construction of them – these too need to be located within the wider and often global set of processes.

The research work will focus on the historical (colonial) and conjunctural character of land grabbing, examining endurance and change, similarities and differences.

It aims furthermore to understand the consequences of capitalist enclosures on communal systems of land tenure, allocation and use, as well as on gender and ethnic relations. In addition to these themes, debates will emerge on the competing political narratives that support land grabbing and discourses of redistributive land reforms. It aims furthermore to analyze whether traditional policy instruments, such as redistributive land and agrarian reforms, can represent a form of resistance to persistent land dispossession, or should they be considered as part of the general effort in promoting legislations and policies on land that sustain and galvanize processes of land grabbing. It aims to understand whether land reforms can promote access to land for rural poor, agriculturalists and pastoralists and can support sustainable livelihood strategies. It does so by analysing the effects of land reforms in selected countries: Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe, South Africa.

This analysis will be complemented by ethnographic researches in the three communities that will be chosen in the three countries. This is crucial to move beyond the surface of macro dynamics and to focus on specific territories and communities. It also helps to unveil subjective, often silenced voices, responses and idiosyncrasies as well as differential impacts in the various communities. Qualitative research here represents a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It uses interpretive practices to make the world visible and to put lights on social agency of people. Additionally it is important to (re)connect the varying levels of social analysis including global dynamics, nation-states, community and individuals to approximate to what Micheal Burawoy labels “global ethnography” (2000). This is fundamental to overcome the isolation of crude empiricist exercise and to dialogically situate the field work within macro forces. This is a methodology to reach for the global in a constitutive, not predefined, manner. This helps to provide interpretative lenses and to recover a sense of social agency lost in universalistic interpretations of social change. Theoretical notions and empirical studies, which are organically related to each other, can provide enlightening synergies to unveil the complexity of social and environmental formations and political processes. The research will endeavour to analyse these inter-related processes from both conjunctural perspective that has characterized much of the literature as well as through the prism of an historical analyses of the *longue durée* of the dynamics of agrarian change. Finally a further attention should be paid to historiographical literature in the three countries. The epistemic significance of such approach is revealed by the fact that different interpretations and readings of history in general and socio-historical change in particular nurture different explanations of, and policy responses to, current processes of mounting social inequalities and poverty. The research techniques I intend to use to develop such analysis are mostly based on fieldwork tools. The collection of qualitative data through life histories of community’s members,

in-depth interviews with local chiefs, rural NGOs, governments' officials and managers of corporations will assist the actualization of this research project.